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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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National Intelligence Officers

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J4 Iran pub. ReviewMEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central IntelligenceVIA : Bruce C. Clarke, Jr.
Deputy Director, National Foreign Assessment25X1A FROM :
Assistant National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

SUBJECT : A Soviet "Best Case" for Military Intervention in Iran (S)

1. This memorandum responds to your request for a straw-man paper making what from the Soviet point of view might be the "best case" for military intervention in Iran. It speculates on Soviet motives and calculations which, taken together, might conceivably lead the Kremlin to cross what it would surely regard as a substantially higher risk threshold than in Afghanistan. Because this is deliberately designed to represent a "best case" for intervention, it resolves a number of very large uncertainties favorably from the Soviet point of view. In the real world, we doubt that the Politburo could be persuaded readily that such optimistic assumptions were warranted, particularly if Soviet leaders perceived that lower-risk options were available to them for influencing the course of events in Iran. (S)

2. The Case for Military Intervention: The Soviet Union cannot tolerate the risks which would inhere in a progressive deterioration of internal order in Iran. Such a trend could be set in motion or be accelerated by Khomeini's death. Protracted civil conflict in, and the possible dismemberment of, such a strategically important state on the Soviet border would create opportunities and incentives for the political, and even military, intervention of other regional powers (for example, Iraq) and of the USA. (S)

3. The greater the development of fissiparous trends, the more difficult, even problematic, would be the restoration of order in the country. The Soviet Union cannot acquiesce in the actual fragmentation of the state; this would irreparably damage our ability in future to control and influence the development and policies of the country. Because an integral Iran is more desirable from the standpoint of Soviet interests, we must act to preserve it. (S)

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4. The Soviet Union should intervene to help an embattled Tehran regime which turned to us for help. Should a besieged central government initiate a policy of closer relations with the US, particularly to acquire security assistance, the USSR would have to intervene to forestall such a shift, and to install a pro-Soviet government. (S)

5. The establishment of a new security relationship with the USA is not an improbable development. The deterioration of internal order, the impotence of the central regime, and heightened anxieties about Soviet intentions subsequent to our intervention in Afghanistan not only make it less likely that the Iranians will adopt a policy of genuine neutrality and equidistance between the USSR and the USA, but raise the probability that Iran will be persuaded of the need to repair relations with the USA. This would propitiate the conditions for the reestablishment of a US political and military presence in the country. Given the longer-term opportunities in the region created for us by our position in Afghanistan, a restored US presence in Iran would not just be turning back the clock. It would represent a qualitative strategic gain for the US, that would impede, and even prevent, implementation over time of regional policies designed to extend Soviet interests and influence. (S)

6. A priority of Soviet policy is to consolidate the USSR's political and military position in Afghanistan; the immediate objective is to eliminate the insurgency. Iranian military and political support to the rebels and the prospect of its significant increase cannot be permitted. (S)

7. The Soviet Union must ensure that oil imports will be available to it and to its East European allies by the middle of this decade. A pro-Soviet government in Iran over which the USSR exerted a dominant influence could assure us those essential supplies at preferential prices. (S)

8. The Iranian military, its capabilities enormously weakened by political divisions and purges, the shortage of spare parts, and its preoccupation with internal security problems in Kurdistan and elsewhere, can offer no meaningful or sustained resistance to a Soviet intervention. To encourage at least a degree of acquiescence by national minorities in Iran Soviet intervention would be accompanied by advocacy of greater autonomy for such groups. (S)

9. The US capability to respond militarily in the region is now limited. Soviet intervention would be rapid and decisive. Even in those areas of Iran which are less accessible (such as Khuzestan and the Iranian littoral), and where the quick insertion of a larger force is less feasible, we will establish an immediate and credible, if limited, military presence. This will present the US with the fait accompli of a Soviet military presence in such areas as Khuzestan and on the Iranian

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littoral, and force Washington to consider a military response in terms of a high-risk confrontation with Soviet forces. The US will have been deprived of a lower-risk intervention option designed to secure the oil fields, while avoiding a direct confrontation with Soviet forces. Raising the potential cost of intervention to the US will lower the probability that the US would actually decide to intervene. Taken together with Soviet strategic interests, which include the oil fields and access to naval facilities on the Iranian coast, such reasoning argues for a more extensive, rather than a limited, military intervention. At the same time, the reaction of the US will be dictated largely by the prevailing anti-Soviet attitudes both within the government and public opinion. The US president will be under enormous pressure in the midst of an election campaign to confront the USSR with military force. On balance, however, shortcomings in US military capabilities and the preemptive nature of the Soviet intervention will dictate prudence. (S)

10. In view of the demonstrated reluctance of the West European nations to follow the US down the path of confrontation with the USSR over the Afghanistan issue, Washington would probably be faced with a decision to undertake military action unilaterally. The USSR could expect threats, vigorous protests, and even the severing of relations by some West European states. But it is of critical importance that, failing the West European will to join with the US in a military confrontation of the USSR, the US would be unlikely to initiate military action against Warsaw Pact forces in Central Europe. Thus, the chances would be good that the conflict in Iran could be contained. To make joint western military action even less likely, the USSR would a) stress that the intervention was of a limited and temporary nature, and initiated solely to stabilize the country and to protect legitimate Soviet security interests, and b) assure the West that the flow of oil would continue. (S)

11. Soviet intervention would undercut the US policy of increasing its political and military presence in other countries of the region, particularly Pakistan. Such a determined act by the USSR would persuade many within the Pak elite that the security of Pakistan depended on coming to terms with the USSR; and that US security guarantees were not an alternative. The USSR would insist upon, and the Paks certainly agree to, immediate termination of Pakistani support for the Afghan insurgency. (S)

12. In India, it is a desideratum of the Ghandi government to maintain favorable, non-antagonistic relations with the USSR. This is a policy evident in Indian acquiescence in Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and one we could expect to continue following intervention in Iran. Indeed, the necessity to adapt to an altered situation in which the USSR is the established arbiter of regional security, to avoid political isolation, and the desire to prevent development of a close

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US-Pakistani tie which could considerably strengthen Pakistan's military capabilities -- all would probably cause India to adapt to Soviet intervention without major alterations in its policies. (S)

13. These considerations, in combination, argue strongly for military intervention in Iran, particularly if Soviet ability to exert a formative influence on the longer-term political development of the country is threatened by domestic crises or the reestablishment of US influence in cooperation with the Iranian government. (S)

NOTE: Because of its brevity and its lack of attention to the complexities of a Soviet decision to intervene in Iran, this "best case" only highlights those considerations which could contribute to such a decision. A more refined Soviet risk assessment of US will and military capability to respond would be of critical, if not determining, importance. Similarly, Soviet assessments of their ability to eliminate Iranian military resistance promptly, and to fashion a central government with a reasonable chance of eventually consolidating political control would be important. The "best case" also begs the question of whether or not the requisite support for such a grave decision could be found in the Politburo; the issue would certainly be more politicized than the decision to invade Afghanistan. On balance, the case for intervention as outlined here is not wholly implausible, but it is unlikely in view of the enormous uncertainties the Soviets would face, and the probability that lower-risk options would be open to them to influence Iranian developments and behavior. (S)

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cc: Chairman, NIC

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